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Interview with Sia Ly Thao

Tou Thao
Concordia University, Saint Paul

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Sia Ly Thao

Interviewer: Tou Thao (grandson)

Translator/Transcriber: Soua Lee (Part One) and Peter Vang (Parts Two & Three)

Editor: Paul Hillmer

Before the war, what was your life like?

Before the war, we didn't know anything. In the morning, we had to go shop for food every day. One morning, Grandma told me to go shop to prepare breakfast. We lived about two miles away. I was looking for food, and all of a sudden people were running like crazy. I heard shouting: "Vietnamese coming! Vietnamese coming! Vietnamese coming!" Everyone ran in their own ways. When I got home, it was a lie. A few months later, I went shopping and the same thing happened. I heard, "Vietnamese coming! Vietnamese coming! Hurry, run run!" I thought, "OK," and ran back home. When I got home, the Vietnamese were already coming close to us. They said we had to run—it was not a false alarm. So we prepared our things. Our father said, "All of you go and stay in the mountain. I will go sleep with the soldiers at the base. I will not come." At that time, Grandma had Uncle Yia, Uncle Ying, Uncle Kou, Uncle Chao, Aunt Jer, Uncle Ger. Uncle Ger was still a baby.

How old were you?

I was about 15 or 16. It was 1961. We took a dog. It would only bark when people or ghosts came. It was a good dog, unlike other dogs that always barked. When that dog barked, there were either people or ghosts around. This time, Uncle said "All of you take the cow and leave." We could only bring the cow because there were too many pigs and chickens, so we didn't take them.

So you left them all?

Yes, we left them in the house and closed the door behind.

Did you regret leaving the animals?

We left as far as 10 miles and slept there. In the daytime, Uncle Yia and I came back home to feed the pigs and chickens. When it got dark, we left again. Maybe Uncle Yia was about 7 years old. Nws ua kuv luag rau qhov kuv yog tus hlob. Now, when we came the first time--nothing happened. We just opened the door. The second time, they had already come and stolen our wheat.

Who stole it?

The Vietnamese soldiers. The second time we came, we had a pond of fish, and they already destroyed it and took the fish. We came to get the rice. We got back on the path, and the Vietnamese soldiers stopped and pointed their guns at us. That was the last time we went to our house. The next day, Uncle sent some people to come get us. We left with them to Long Cheng, the flat ground village. We saw General Vang Pao. We lived there for a few years. At the town, your father and I were both single. We got married at *Phu Kho (Phuj Khom) and had Sheng and Houa. Then we left to Thailand because the Vietnamese soldiers were coming. Your father did not take the car with us. He took the boat.

What village were you in before you fled?

We were in *Phu Kho. We went to *Nasu.

What was the night like when you were going to run?

That night--they said for us to wake up early and prepare food to eat.

Who said that?

The villagers. They said "tomorrow we have to run because the Vietnamese soldiers are coming."

Were you scared then?

I was scared.

What were you thinking?

I could not sleep. I only prepared a small bag. Grandma woke up early to cook a pot of rice. Tia and Wong were very small. After she finished the rice, we went to the street. Your father came to meet us. He piggybacked Tia and I piggybacked Wong--

Was it dark?

It was almost light in the morning. Ong was still little. Your father gave his shirt for her to carry. After a while, she got tired and could not walk, so your father just threw the shirt away, and he didn't have a shirt to wear. We hired a taxi and took it to *Nasu.

What happened in Nasu?

We got to *Nasu and slept there for a night. Your father said he was a soldier. The Vietnamese soldiers knew him. We took the car, and he went by foot, so if the soldiers saw him, he could lie that he was going fishing. He got to *Pasdej Tauv and took a taxi to *Vieng Tieng.

Were you scared that the soldiers would arrest him?

We got to *Vieng Tieng. A Hmong guy asked if we wanted to go to Thailand. We were scared of the enemy, so we said yes, and he took all of us to the river. When we got there he said, "Hurry, get in the water!" We went down into the water. The boat came closer to us; it was rocking back and forth, and we were about to get in there. But the Vietnamese soldiers stood on a small hill by the water. They pointed their guns at us and asked where we were going. This time, we had to come back. We were shaking and scared. We lied to them that we were going to go to the big city. They took us to a military bureau, but they didn't do anything to us. They sent us somewhere and were going to find a place for us to stay. We stayed for three days before the men and your father reached us. They said that the next day by 2pm we had to run. Just a while later, they came and said, "Go, go, go, let's hurry." It was midnight. We got up and took the kids, some clothes, and our money. We didn't prepare anything else. We went outside and checked the kids. Chou Tou was missing. We went back in and checked the beds. Chou Tou was still deep asleep. We carried him, and left to the river. We rode the boat across. Some Thais waited for us. We stayed for two days in Thailand and went to Namphong.

So the two days that you spent in Thailand...was that in the camp?

No. We only stayed in people's porches.

Whose porches?

The Thais. The porches were dirty and nasty, but we slept there.

Who took you across the river?

Some Laotian men who we paid that night to take us across.

They were willing?

Yes, if you paid them, they would help you escape.

Were they soldiers?

No, they were just citizens. We lived there for two days, and they sent for some big buses to come get us to *Namphong.

Where is *Namphong?

It's an old military base in Thailand. All of the people who escaped were sent there.

[End part one]

I believe that those who [want to] understand the importance of the Hmong culture must study it. If you do not study your culture and history than you cannot explain to anyone about yourself or where you came from. Those who study their roots and history can easily tell who they are and their lineage. They can recall their parents' stories and where their parents came from. Those who do this will be respected. If you do not, then you will not be respected within our community. We can start talking about our origins and where we come, from but we must study so we can do it also. We were not all Christian. We used to have our old religion and I could remember our grandfather used to say that he never knew any of our ancestors to be opium addicts or Christians, why should we change our way? He told us to respect the Christians but we should not be Christian. If we become Christian then we'll be poor and there will be no blessing and reward for us if we die. [Non-Christian Hmong usually burn paper money so the dead could take it and "spend" it in the after-life.] He told us not to become Christian so we would have money for the after-life to use and spend. Those who aren't Christian receive food offerings and paper money for the after-life, and they are not hungry or poor. We are Hmong and our ancestors never became Christian. Why should we become Christians? Even if our traditional religion is hard to follow, we must keep true to it. Only through this way can you teach others about your culture and history. You will not be respected among the community. It was my grandfather's teaching that turned every one of us from continuing to go to church. (4:25)

Keep on talking to me, the tape is still rolling. Can you tell me about your early years of experience living in the US?

We didn't know about the cold and snow. (4:55)

Where did you first live?

We lived in [Tou stepped in and spoke for his mother... "Winona"] We just lived there and then we moved here afterward. (5:14)

How long did you live there?

We lived for only one year. (5:21)

Do you remember what year?

I don't quite remember [Sia chuckled for a bit] ...I think you should go ask your father regarding that. [Tou chuckled back and said "I will ask my father then."] Ask your father or Bee and they can tell you. (5:37)

My father came here a couple years before all of you, right?

Yes, he came here early before all of you were born. (5:47)

Did father come to the US four or five years before you?

I'm not sure; you should ask your father about that. We lived down there and it's the same as living here. We lived there for only a year before your father said that this place [Twin Cities] was better for growing and selling cucumbers and melons, and we moved up here because of that. (6:29)

How long have you been living here?

I think it's about 15 years now. I'm pretty sure it's around there. It could have been 16 years, but I'm not sure. We have been living here for a very long time. (6:59)

Do you still miss living in Laos?

Yes I do. I miss it very much, but it's not like how we used to live back then. When I went back to visit it was very different.

How different is it now?

It's different because all the natural vegetation is gone. There's no suitable place to farm for a living. I went there three years ago. I know that if I do go back I cannot make a living by being a farmer anymore. The land is not fertile and everyone is poor. There's not enough land for everyone to farm. I know that it would be very difficult going back to live there again. It's only through the donations of relatives living in the US that those living back in Laos are able to make it through. After visiting Laos, I made my mind up that I will not be going back to live there, even though some of my relatives pressed me to stay with them. Grandfather is gone, but those who live back in Laos still remember grandfather's kindness and they want me to live with them and they'll take good care of me. I didn't know what to do, so I told them that I would love to stay but I needed to go back to America to talk to my sons first. They told me that because I cannot go anywhere in America I should live with them and be free to go anywhere I want. All I said to them was in a few days I will come back if all goes well. Truthfully I cannot go back because everyone is living in poverty and there's no good land for farming anymore. There's no more good food to eat like back in the old days. I only wish to go back if I could relive the old days when I was a youth. Now everybody is poor there and there's no suitable way to make a living. I cannot go back and live in poverty anymore because I'm used to the good life here in America. All my sons are here and there's no reason to go back. The government in Laos has also changed and it's not the same anymore. I notice that the other people are doing well, but not the Hmong. The Hmong are still living in despair. I went back only because I miss your grandpa and I cried to them [the relatives still living in Laos] because they were a part of grandpa's life. The day I was about to leave, they clung to me and started to weep, but I couldn't because I made my decision to come back and live in America. I realized that there was nothing left for me there [in Laos]. I came back with no regrets and now I am content. Many wanted me to stay with them but I realized this is not possible. All the places that I traveled to were poor and made me homesick. The foods were not nourishing and I couldn't eat them because they were not rich like the food in America. I ate what I could because they were my relatives and I didn't want to hurt their feelings. When I came back I had no desire to go back [to Laos] and live there. I would only go back to visit. I have no sons left there and there is no point for me to go back. Everybody here [in America] takes good care of me and my sons and daughters-in-law love and care for me very much. I can go to anyone's house and I am welcome anywhere. Why would I go back to Laos? I'm very fortunate that my family takes good care of me and doesn't neglect me like other elders that I know. We all have the patience and forgiveness to

live together. (15:18)

Do you miss your sons?

Yes, I do miss them dearly. I cannot freely travel [in Minnesota] during the winter because of the snow, but I can during the summer time. I tend to travel here and there and it helps me to get some exercise so I won't be sick. I miss my sons and the grandchildren but I decided to come here. Whenever I need to see my sons and their families, I can always take the bus up to town to see them. [I assume that Sia Ly Thao and her husband moved out of the Twin Cities and they are not as connected with their sons and families as before.] As a family I will always miss those who are far away. I realize that there are many advantages to living together here. (18:07)

The cassette is going to end pretty soon, so why won't you give us more information about yourself?

I am originally from the Yang Clan. My name is Sia. I am now 78 years old. (18:26)

You are 78 years old?

Yes (18:28)

You lived in the US for 14 to 15 years now?

Yes, I think so. I'm not so sure but I'll check my Green Card [Legal Alien Registration Card] [laughter from Tou upon hearing this]. I will ask Neng when he gets home. (18:48)

How long have you and grandpa been married?

Hmmmm....we have been married for a long time. I don't remember how long it is. (18:56)

Do you remember how many years?

It's been so long I don't know the number of years now.

[Moving to Part III]

We didn't keep track of it [marriage] in Laos so I can't really tell you. Even the Americans say that I'm not really 78 and that I'm giving them a number only. [Tou laughed after Sia said that.] When we registered for adult learning the Americans told me that they don't believe me and that there is no way I am 78. The Americans said that their 78 years old folks can't walk anymore but I'm so fit and still claim to be 78 years old? [They both laughed at this.] I just told them that it's my real age and I left it at that. I asked Neng whether I was 76 or 78 years old. He told me that I was 78. When I went to get my license I wrote down that I was 78 years old. (1:08)

If you're 78 years old now and you married grandpa when you were 16, then you two have been married for 50-60 years.

Yes around there. I barely knew how to make steamed rice when I was married to grandpa. My steamed rice was terrible and someone else would steam the rice instead of me. I just sat around and didn't know what to do until I was directed toward a task. Grandpa said he was already 20 years old [Tou laughed at this notion.] when we were married. That's what he told me, so that's all I knew. [Discussion between the two about different ages and during what time period Sia and her husband were married.] (3:34)

Grandma, how many siblings do you have?

I have seven sisters all together and I have four brothers. Most of them passed away.

How many passed away?

There is one brother living here [in the US] and one living in Laos. There are two sisters living in Laos and one other sister along with me living here. (4:28)

This is pretty much it, but do you have anything else to say?

This should be good. I'm very old and there are many memories that I have lost. What I remember please keep it as memories. Whatever I said that was wrong or inappropriate, please disregard it. [Tou agrees with her.] I'm just telling you stories of my life...nothing more. (5:22)